

The Modernisation of Russia 1676–1825

SIMON DIXON



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1 Modernisation theory and Russian history

Modernisation theory

Loosely conceived, ‘modernisation’ may signify nothing more than a programme of reform required to bring an allegedly outmoded institution ‘up to date’ and fit to face the future. In Britain, for example, both the Labour Party and the Anglican church have recently been subjected to such campaigns, the one with more obvious benefit than the other. Modernisation, in this simple sense, has long appealed to historians as shorthand for the ways in which an apparently isolated and backward Muscovy – transformed into the Russian empire when Peter the Great (1672–1725) assumed the title ‘Imperator’ at the thanksgiving service for the end of the Great Northern War on 22 October 1721 – adopted Western standards in the eighteenth century in order to compete in the cut-throat world of the European international system. Scholars, however, have given modernisation explicit conceptual content, and it is in this sense, not always synonymous with Westernisation and sometimes directly contrary to it, that the term will be used in this book.

Modernisation theory takes as its principal economic transformation the shift from a network of predominantly rural communities, preoccupied by the needs of agrarian self-subsistence, to an increasingly urbanised, market-oriented society dominated by mechanised industry. A specialised workforce, distinguished by a division of labour unknown to traditional society, is supplied by a demographic revolution brought about by a fall first in mortality rates and later in fertility rates. Sustained economic growth, beyond the reach of traditional society, grants increased productivity to the modern state and a better standard of living to the majority of its population. Whereas traditional communities were stable hierarchies dominated by kinship networks, modern social mobility creates a more impersonal society in which national loyalties outweigh social ones. In this sense, nationalism generates nations, and not the other way around. Within the amorphous national mass, individuals have more choice than before, empowered not only by increased

affluence but also by the spread of literacy. This allows the written word to replace face-to-face contact as the principal mode of communication. By popularising scientific discoveries, education helps to demystify the world, enabling modern man to spend more time contemplating his history than agonising about his future. Wider access to education makes traditionally restricted high culture publicly accessible and opens up careers based on talent rather than on lineage, leading ultimately to an increase in popular politicisation and political equality. However, there is a price to pay. Modern states, in which personal sovereignty is eclipsed by bureaucratic institutions governed by law, exert a tighter fiscal hold over their citizens than did their traditional predecessors and constantly seek to extend their regulatory tentacles. Further, autonomous individuals may become alienated from their fellows and are likely to be beset by doubt in a secular modern world.¹

Derived from the ideas of Max Weber (1864–1920), and reformulated by English-speaking scholars in the 1960s, such a bold thesis could hardly be expected to pass without criticism. Its rigid categories are by definition incompatible with the shimmering world of post-modernism. Yet post-modernists who regard rationality as an elusive, not to say undesirable, goal are far from the only ones to question modernisation theory: conventional scholars have also attacked it. Its linearity is evidently misleading: historians of religion, for example, have convincingly rejected any straight-line claims for secularisation.² Recoiling from the excesses of concept-driven historical writing, Joanna Innes complains in the cause of authenticity that ‘we obstruct our own efforts to understand the eighteenth century by imposing upon it a set of analytical dichotomies [industrial/pre-industrial, secular/religious and so on] with their roots in nineteenth-century

¹ This paragraph amalgamates several key statements of the theory. Important early formulations included C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization* (New York, 1967), and S. N. Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change and Modernity* (New York, 1973). J. Goody and I. Watt, ‘The Consequences of Literacy’, in Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 27–68, signified an interest in modernisation theory that was subsequently modified in Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977), and implicitly retracted in Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge, 1996). The central modernist interpretation of nationalism is E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983). Among recent reflections, see S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Patterns of Modernity*, 2 vols. (London, 1987); M. Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1989); J. A. Hall and I. C. Jarvie, eds., *Transition to Modernity: Essays on Power, Wealth and Belief* (Cambridge, 1992); C. Offe, *Modernity and the State: East, West* (Oxford, 1996). See also H.-U. Wehler, *Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1975), and T. Nipperdey, ‘Probleme der Modernisierung in Deutschland’, *Saeculum*, 30 (1979).

² See S. Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization: Historians and Sociologists Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford, 1992).

social science'.³ And the modernist view of nationalism has recently sustained a damaging blow (though not a knock-out punch) from Adrian Hastings.⁴

In fact, modernisation theory has been vilified by both Left and Right. The Left took offence at the arrogance of the theory's Anglo-American liberal-capitalist assumptions and condemned it for making invidious comparisons between 'advanced' societies and so-called latecomers. It was in this way that modernisation became equated with Westernisation, which critics portrayed as 'a subtle form of "cultural imperialism"' discredited by its association with American expansionism.⁵ By contrast, the Right, offended by modernity itself, has tended to dismiss modernisation as the Whig theory of progress dressed up in sociological jargon, and to condemn it for offering the sort of teleological historical education that imparted to Evelyn Waugh's unprepossessing Hooper 'a profusion of detail about humane legislation and recent industrial change' when it might instead have instilled in him a litany of glorious battles and respect for religious orthodoxy.⁶

Even its most distinguished proponents acknowledge weaknesses in modernisation theory. In striving for comprehensiveness, to borrow a phrase from the late Ernest Gellner, it sacrifices precision, so that the exact 'conditions of the exit' from tradition to modernity remain unclear.⁷ Overexcited by the prospect of quantifying historical change in terms of economic growth, early theorists made modernisation synonymous with industrialisation. Long after their optimism had evaporated, Gellner continued to stress the qualitative influence of industrialisation, arguing that the mutual relationship of a modern culture and state were determined by the requirements of a modern economy. By contrast, E. A. Wrigley distinguishes *between* modernisation and industrialisation, seeing 'the twin, key notions' underpinning modernisation as 'rationality and self-interest', where rational behaviour is defined as action tending to maximise the decision-maker's economic returns, and self-interest is

³ J. Innes, 'Jonathan Clark, Social History and England's "Ancien Regime"', *P&P*, 115 (1987), p. 177.

⁴ A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁵ D. C. Tipps, 'Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective', *CSSH*, 15, 1 (1973), pp. 209–10. Tipps's article is reprinted with other significant contributions to the debate in C. E. Black, ed., *Comparative Modernization: A Reader* (New York and London, 1976).

⁶ E. Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 15. The most aggressive spokesman for this point of view has been J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832* (Cambridge, 1985), and Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion* (Cambridge, 1986). See Innes's critique (above, n. 3).

⁷ E. Gellner's *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (London, 1988) is his most ambitious treatment of the subject.

interpreted in terms of individual monetary gain.⁸ Cyril Black's definition of modernisation suggested that 'economic development depends to a great extent on the intellectual and political aspects of the process, the growth in knowledge and the ability of political leaders to mobilise resources'.⁹ A fourth variant, pioneered by Joseph Lee, defines modernisation as 'the growth of equality of opportunity', since 'this requires that merit supersede birth as the main criterion for the distribution of income, status and power, and this, in turn, involves the creation of political consciousness among the masses, the decline of deference based on inherited status, and the growth of functional specialisation, without which merit can hardly begin to be measured'.¹⁰ In the light of these differing modulations, it is clear why Wrigley once confessed that 'a cynic might say that modernisation has come to be a term of convenience used by those who are aware of the profound difference between traditional and modern society, and need a word which can convey their appreciation of its importance, but which does not commit them to any one interpretation of the causes or the course of change'.¹¹

According to its many detractors, then, modernisation theory, inherently disfigured by anachronism and ethnocentrism, is either too diffuse or too rigid to be a useful conceptual tool. Confronted with such a barrage of criticism, one can see why a scholar who 'stumbled upon the debate unwittingly' instinctively wished he could 'stay out of it altogether'.¹² Why have so many historians of Russia persevered with a concept which arouses such widespread dissent?

The first point to make is that modernisation theory is not the only concept to prove 'a slippery thing susceptible of subtle massage and rough manipulation alike':¹³ the same could be said of any historical model. If we place such models as templates over the past, expecting them to correspond in every detail, then naturally we shall be disappointed. Instead, it seems more appropriate to use models as prisms through which to view any given historical society. Certain features will doubtless be magnified or distorted; others may slip from view. Yet

⁸ E. A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 99–100. For Gellner's comments on Wrigley, see his 'On the Highway to Perpetual Growth', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11–17 September 1987, pp. 980–2, a review of E. A. Wrigley, *People, Cities and Wealth: The Transformation of Traditional Society* (Oxford, 1987).

⁹ Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization*, p. 20.

¹⁰ J. Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848–1918* (Dublin, 1973), preface, n.p.

¹¹ E. A. Wrigley, 'The Process of Modernization and the Industrial Revolution in England', *JIH*, 3, 2 (1972), p. 228.

¹² D. H. Kaiser, *The Growth of the Law in Medieval Russia* (Princeton, 1980), p. ix.

¹³ K. T. Hoppen, 'Ireland, Britain and Europe: Twentieth-Century Nationalism and Its Spoils', *Hj*, 34, 2 (1991), p. 505.

without some organising principle, however tacit, the historian's work would lack explanatory power. Rather than profess not to have inhaled an intoxicating substance, it has seemed sensible to begin by setting out some of our chosen model's salient side effects.

Yet, in the Russian context, the modernisation model can also claim curative properties. Most obviously, we can point to evidence that Peter the Great and his acolytes were themselves self-conscious modernisers, even though 'modernisation' was not a word they used.¹⁴ Neither were they the last influential Russians to think in this way. The fact that 'the drive to modernise, begun around 1700 as the wish of a ruler, became by 1750–60 the cornerstone of the government's policies, an important ingredient of the political class's ethos, and finally a tradition of government'¹⁵ helps to explain why modernisation remains central to most histories of Russia. Even two scholars who dismiss modernisation theory as 'a shopping list of traits identified with the industrialised West in the twentieth century' and prefer 'to discuss population growth or industrialisation in their own terms without reference to an illusory standard' nevertheless refer blithely – and accurately – to 'the modernisation efforts of Peter the Great and his successors'.¹⁶

If modernisation theory offers a way of understanding the motives of Russia's rulers as an 'attitude of mind' designed to encourage creativity and make full use of both intellectual and material resources,¹⁷ then the 'analytical dichotomies' around which the theory revolves also have a particular resonance in the Russian context. Lotman and Uspenskii have insisted that the eighteenth-century opposition between rhetorics of 'new' and 'old' – generated when the autocratic ruler's commitment to innovation automatically branded those who resisted change as subversives – was symptomatic of a wider polar dualism integral to a culture that knew no neutral zone between heaven and hell, Christ and Antichrist, or Holy Russia and the sinful West.¹⁸ Their model is no less vulnerable to charges of distortion than any other. In particular, it has provoked important attempts to re-emphasise the social and political significance of the 'grey zones and middle ground' for which these

¹⁴ See first L. R. Lewitter, 'Peter the Great and the Modern World', in P. Dukes, ed., *Russia and Europe* (London, 1991), pp. 92–107.

¹⁵ M. Confino, 'Traditions, Old and New: Aspects of Protest and Dissent in Modern Russia', in Eisenstadt, *Patterns of Modernity*, vol. II, *Beyond the West*, p. 17.

¹⁶ P. M. Hohenberg and L. H. Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1950* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), pp. 178, 168.

¹⁷ M. Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change Through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800* (New Haven, CT, 1983), p. 120, n. 150.

¹⁸ Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij, 'The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (Up to the End of the Eighteenth Century)', in their *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. A. Shukman (Ann Arbor, MI, 1984), pp. 3–35.

Russian scholars found no room.¹⁹ But this is not to deny the conceptual utility of binary oppositions whose cultural roots can be traced not to nineteenth-century German sociology but to native medieval eschatology. In that sense, there is nothing anachronistic about using them to interpret the eighteenth century.

The survival of apocalyptic imagery into the 1920s and 1930s, when renewed insecurity prompted peasants to identify the nascent Soviet régime with Antichrist,²⁰ warns against any simplistic interpretation of modernisation as a linear process. Neither was it only the collectivist, risk-averse peasantry who preserved elements of traditionalism. For all Peter the Great's rhetoric, not all his policies were new, and many of his innovations succeeded only because they relied on well-tried Muscovite methods. I shall also highlight tensions between economic liberalism and social conservatism, and between freedom of intellectual inquiry and the requirements of political stability that ultimately persuaded the state to doubt the value of ideas it had once encouraged. Nor was this the only paradox: taxes designed to fund modernisation ultimately consolidated serfdom. So, far from entrenching some Whiggish notion of linear progress, modernisation theory can be used to show not only that Muscovy needs to be taken seriously on its own terms, but that due weight must be given to its legacy in Russian history. Indeed, although Russia began to look increasingly backward from the middle of the nineteenth century, the survival of traditionalism did more to strengthen than to weaken it before 1825. What made Russia powerful in our period was the peculiar compound *mixture* of traditional and modern that, in varying measure, was also characteristic of its rivals: Austria, Prussia, Britain and France.²¹

This helps us to answer a question which has naturally exercised Russian minds in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's fall: did the Russian failure to embrace capitalism stunt its development as a modern state? A leading Russian scholar has recently argued that Muscovy

¹⁹ Notably V. Kivelson, *Autocracy in the Provinces: The Muscovite Gentry and Political Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (Stanford, CA, 1996), quote from p. 266. See also E. K. Wirtschafter, *Structures of Society: Imperial Russia's 'People of Various Ranks'* (DeKalb, IL, 1994).

²⁰ L. Viola, 'The Peasant Nightmare: Visions of Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside', *JMH*, 62 (1990), pp. 747–70; S. Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 80–1.

²¹ For sophisticated use of the concept of modernity, see S. Schama, *Citizens* (London, 1989); P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989); T. C. W. Blanning, 'The French Revolution and the Modernization of Germany', *Central European History*, 22, 2 (1989), pp. 109–30; Blanning, *Joseph II* (London, 1994); and J. M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1997).

overcame a 'crisis of traditionalism' at the end of the seventeenth century by a necessary programme of 'Europeanisation' that was fatefully diverted along a 'special path' by the failure to abolish serfdom.²² Historians of Germany were once attracted by a related thesis. But the notion that the German *Sonderweg* was warped by the lack of a bourgeois revolution now finds little support. It has been undermined partly by research into the *Bürgertum* but principally by the recognition that there is no common standard from which to diverge.²³ I shall not attempt to deny Russian history its distinctive identity. But by using modernisation theory as a comparative analytical framework rather than as a measure of normative development, we shall also be able to see important parallels with the Western states against which it became locked in deadly rivalry.

Some critics, as we know, regard such comparisons with distaste. Eighteenth-century Russians would have been surprised to hear it. They knew that they were lost if they could not compete with their neighbours. Population size, the impact of fiscal change on social structure, the rational ordering of administration, and the capacity to harness scientific knowledge to productive economic activity – all crucial elements in modernisation theory – were also among the indices by which eighteenth-century European states measured their relative strength. I shall follow their example in a series of thematic chapters. However, let us begin by tracing Russian history between 1676 and 1825, highlighting one of its most anti-modern features: the recurrent crises occasioned by the lack of a fixed law of succession.

Russian history, 1676–1825

Few could have predicted that the dynasty enthroned in 1613 would live to celebrate its 300th anniversary. Yet endurance was to prove one of the Romanovs' greatest assets. Under their cautious stewardship, Muscovy quickly recovered from the Time of Troubles (1598–1613) unleashed by the succession crises that followed the death of Ivan IV (the Terrible) in 1584. Messianic pretensions implicit in the notion of Moscow as the third Rome had made little enough impact on sixteenth-century rulers; under the early Romanovs they were further subjugated to a basic strategy of survival. Risking a policy of selective Westernisation that

²² A. B. Kamenskii, *The Russian Empire in the Eighteenth Century: Searching for a Place in the World*, tr. and ed. D. Griffiths (Armonk, NY, 1997), pp. 35–6, 117–18, 281–6, and *passim*.

²³ A key revisionist work was D. Blackbourn and G. Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984).

helped to reform part of their army, the new dynasty checked the advances of rival neighbours in Poland-Lithuania and the Ottoman empire and strengthened domestic administration. Aleksei Mikhailovich (1645–76) subdued riots in Moscow in June 1648 and put down further revolts in and around Pskov and Novgorod in 1650. Twenty years later, the cossack Stepan Razin was defeated at Simbirsk, though only after Tsaritsyn and Astrakhan' had fallen to his rebellion. The tsar's survival depended not simply on force but also on compromise. By balancing the demands of his wealthiest subjects against those of lesser officers, he was able to turn concessions to his own advantage. Further defining the privileges and responsibilities enjoyed and incurred by various splintered groups, Aleksei Mikhailovich reinforced the development of a loose but increasingly stratified social hierarchy. The key Muscovite principle of service to the state was enshrined in the *Ulozhenie* of 1649, a law code promulgated in response to the riots of the year before.²⁴ This was the last and most comprehensive of a series of pragmatic Muscovite codes; but it also signalled a novel intention to regulate the activities of society as a whole.

The activist language of the *Ulozhenie* throws into relief the passivity of the achievements I have just outlined: invaders had been repelled, rebels had been quashed, the dynasty had been preserved. Until the middle of the seventeenth century, Muscovy's rulers were more than content with such a strategy; indeed, it approached their ideal. Since the notion of the 'good tsar' was conceived in terms of piety, self-abnegation, and humility rather than active interventionism in affairs of state, the monarch's goal was to preserve the status quo, not to reform it. It does not seem to have occurred to Aleksei Mikhailovich's predecessors that they could mobilise the population in search of strategic goals. That he began to think of doing so implies the emergence of unwelcome new pressures, both within and outside his own realm.

At home, the seamless relationship between the Orthodox church and the state was torn apart when the Church Council of 1666–7 pronounced anathema on those who rejected a series of liturgical reforms initially proposed by Patriarch Nikon and finally enforced with the support of the tsar. The schism²⁵ divided adherents of an increasingly 'official' church from so-called Old Believers just when Orthodoxy needed to be at its most supple to face the challenge of Counter-

²⁴ R. Hellie, tr. and ed., *The Muscovite Law Code (Ulozhenie) of 1649. Part I: Text and Translation* (Irvine, CA, 1988). See also Hellie, 'Early Modern Russian Law: The Ulozhenie of 1649', *RH*, 15, 2–4 (1988), pp. 155–80, and commentaries in *RH*, 17 (1990), and *CASS*, 25 (1991).

²⁵ Like 'the French Revolution', 'the schism' was a more complex series of events and movements than the conventional singular implies.

Reformation Catholicism in Ukraine, incorporated at the treaty of Pereiaslav' in 1654. Both national unity and royal spiritual authority were damaged to an extent that far outweighed any gain the state may have made by crippling the church as a potential focus of opposition. Neither was Muscovy's international position secure. Condemned by geography to occupy territory with no clearly defined natural borders, Muscovy may have resisted its rivals, but it had not overcome them. Sweden, Poland and the Ottoman empire still rejoiced in what looked, for most of the reign of Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715), like invincible French protection. Moreover, if Muscovy was to compete in Europe, it was bound to incur significant expense. And it was not obvious that its centralised decision-making system, designed to impose order on chaos and to prevent the rise of local power bases, would be able to respond any more flexibly to this new financial imperative than it had to the challenge of the schism.

Latent weaknesses were exposed when Aleksei Mikhailovich died in 1676. Although historians usually pass rapidly over the brief reign of his teenage son, Fedor (1661–82), it is significant from the point of view of modernisation. For the first time in the seventeenth century, Muscovy went on the offensive in a war against the Turks that lasted from 1676 to 1681. The government sought to pay for the campaign by converting in 1679–81 from a system of taxation based on land to one based on households, assessed according to the census conducted in 1678. Ambitious changes to local government were also planned, though their most immediate consequence – the abolition in 1682 of *mestnichestvo*, the outdated precedence system by which boiars had traditionally defended their honour – upset few. Eighteenth-century Russia would become used to a pattern in which international ambition provoked fiscal and administrative reform with important social consequences. But there is still work to do in investigating that pattern's origins in the seventeenth century. Though perhaps not so incapacitated as historians once supposed, the tsar himself was scarcely the moving force behind changes which probably owed most to Prince V. V. Golitsyn (1643–1714). Yet the disturbances which followed Fedor's unexpected death on 27 April 1682 were enough to check the impulse for reform.

The succession crisis temporarily brought into focus the clannish connexions, normally too elastic to be described as factions, which dominated Muscovite élite politics. Two main networks lined up behind the surviving sons of Aleksei Mikhailovich, rival candidates for the throne in the absence of a written law of succession. Peter, aged ten, was promptly 'elected' by his mother's family, the Naryshkins, who hoped to regain influence lost at the death of his father; though weak both in body

and in mind, Peter's sixteen-year-old half-brother, Ivan, was backed by *his* mother's family, the Miloslavskiis, on grounds of seniority. However, there was more to the ensuing chaos than this simple rivalry might imply. In particular, it mattered that the 55,000-strong palace guards (*strel'tsy*) not only included a significant number of Old Believers who suspected a plot by 'wicked' Naryshkin advisers to instal a 'false' monarch, but were also the most prominent of those outmoded regiments who resented being sidelined by military reform. Their rebellion on 15–17 May settled scores unconnected with either the Miloslavskiis or Tsar Ivan, in whose name they claimed to act. In the aftermath of the bloodshed, a compromise was reached. While the joint rule of Ivan and Peter was ritually confirmed in the Cathedral of the Dormition on 26 May, *de facto* power passed to Ivan's elder sister, Sophia Alekseevna (1657–1704), in response to a petition from the guards who were to remain guarantors of the Russian throne throughout our period.

Shrewd as she was, Sophia was scarcely in a position to release Muscovy from its political paralysis. She made much of her ambiguous constitutional status, provoking remarkably little opposition as Russia's first female ruler. But she owed the comparative tranquillity of her regency (never formally acknowledged) not to some pre-considered programme of reform but to a tacit compact with boiars who expected no great change. Though markedly receptive to Western culture, this tiny élite had little incentive to modernise government and society as a whole. The limits to their tolerance were revealed when Sophia campaigned for recognition as ruler in her own right in the late 1680s; to contemplate coronation was to overplay her hand. Sophia's reputation had been tarnished by Golitsyn's inglorious Crimean campaigns of 1687 and 1689. In September 1689, having fought to the last for her political life, she herself succumbed to *strel'tsy* pressure, spending her remaining years under arrest in Moscow's Novodevichii convent. Though Tsar Ivan survived until 29 January 1696, Muscovy was now in the hands of Aleksei Mikhailovich's fourteenth child, known to posterity as Peter the Great.

Long fascinated by ships and soldiers, Peter, who had betrayed little interest in government in the early 1680s, soon proved an active interventionist in affairs of state. He had already become the first tsar to visit the central chancelleries in person, descending unannounced overnight in spring 1688. Following the death of his mother, Natal'ia Naryshkina, in January 1694, his domination was unquestioned. A giant of volcanic energy and a scourge of idleness, Peter maintained a lasting preference for impulsive personal supervision in matters both major and minor. He oversaw the compilation of an *Alphabetical Lexicon of New*

Vocabulary, never published, making corrections in his own hand; following his Grand Embassy to the West in 1697–8 and a subsequent visit to Paris in 1717, he was intimately involved with the minutiae of ordering equipment, even specifying the type of birdseed required to feed his new canaries; and he made his own designs for fortifications at newly captured Azov in 1696 and 1706, and at Noteborg (which he rechristened Shlisselburg – ‘Key-stronghold’) in 1702. More importantly, the tsar made the decisive contribution to key legislation, notably the Maritime Regulation (*Morskoi ustav*) and the General Regulation (*General’nyi reglament*), both promulgated in 1720, and the Table of Ranks issued in 1722. Even in the final five years of his life, when government was nominally in the hands of the administrative system he had created, nearly 60 per cent of the tsar’s 3,019 edicts were written by Peter himself, or shaped by his intervention.

Just as there was no question about Peter’s capacity for work, so there was no doubting his thirst for novelty. The first tsar to leave Muscovy, he was captivated by scientific instruments, many of which he saw and bought on his travels abroad. Journeys designed to acquaint him with Western advances in military technology stimulated an unprecedentedly large influx into Russia of the sort of foreign craftsmen and technicians who had earlier advised his father and grandfather. Peter’s work on maps of the Crimea helped to justify his election to the French Academy of Sciences in 1717, though this honour evidently owed more to his royal status than to his limited scholarly achievements. Had the tsar’s fascination for all that was new amounted to no more than caprice, it might have reduced Russia to chaos. As Lord Curzon remarked of the ‘childlike passion for novelty’ displayed by a later would-be moderniser, Shah Nasir al-Din of Persia (1848–96): ‘The lumber rooms of the palace are not more full of broken mechanisms and discarded bric-à-brac than are the pigeon-holes of the government bureaux of abortive reforms and dead fiascos.’²⁶ By contrast, Peter’s carefully catalogued curios were soon displayed in the Kunstkammer, one of the first public buildings in St Petersburg, the city founded in 1703 and made the capital in 1714 to symbolise the dawn of a new era. And this was only the most celebrated of Peter’s rejections of Muscovite political culture. Scholars have suggested that his adoption of the title ‘Imperator’ carried echoes of Byzantine theocracy. But many contemporaries were struck rather by its association with pagan Rome.²⁷ It was the same with the

²⁶ Quoted in E. Kedourie, *Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 78–9.

²⁷ See I. de Madariaga, ‘Tsar into Emperor: The Title of Peter the Great’, in R. Oresko, *et al.*, eds., *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of Ragnhild Hatton* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 351–81.

tsar's campaign against beards and Muscovite dress, his adoption of the classical festive 'entry' as the principal form of public celebration, his abolition of the patriarchate (replaced by an appointed Holy Synod in 1721) and his unprecedented decision to crown his second wife, Catherine, in 1724. Together they amounted to a rhetorical repudiation of almost everything he had inherited. Small wonder that Peter was branded heretical by his opponents.

Beneath the rhetoric, however, much that was redolent of the sixteenth century survived into the eighteenth, when the period of relative security granted by Peter's victory over the Swedes at Poltava in 1709 created the opportunity to translate piecemeal legislation into systematic reform. A crucial stage in the transition from personal to bureaucratic government was heralded in 1720 when the General Regulation set out detailed procedural rules for the colleges Peter had created to run central government in 1718. But these new institutions, like the court and the army, were to be staffed by nobles obliged to climb the Table of Ranks.²⁸ This was the single most important symbol of the survival of the Muscovite service principle, now openly expressed in terms of merit rather than lineage, though Aleksei Mikhailovich had himself deliberately promoted talented men of modest social background, and lineage, as we shall see in chapter 4, remained a significant determinant of social status throughout our period. The adoption of a military ranking system for civilians showed how little the tsar's outlook had altered: the Military Regulation of 1716, a harsh code of discipline also applied by the civil courts, represented a further application of military principles to the civilian sphere. All these measures bore the imprint of the tsar's technocratic mind; all were designed to create an autonomous state machine; and this in turn was to be a means to Peter's principal end, the mobilisation of Russia's human and natural resources in search of international prestige.

Historians have generally been divided between those who see impulsive personal dynamism as the key to Peter's reign, and those who place the germ of his rational planning no later than April 1702, when a manifesto on the invitation of foreigners to Russia, drafted in German by the Livonian J. R. Patkul, spoke broadly of the need for regulation to secure the common good. Paradoxically, both schools of thought are right. Behind the tsar's modernising rhetoric lay the suspicion that, left

²⁸ The fundamental work remains S. M. Troitskii, *Russkii absolutizm i dvorianstvo v XVIIIv.: formirovanie biurokratii* (Moscow, 1974), pp. 3–118, one of a handful of outstanding Soviet books on the eighteenth century, but see also the comparative study by A. N. Medushevskii, *Uvverzhdenie absolutizma v Rossii: sravnitel'noe istoricheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow, 1994).

to their own devices, men were too flawed to achieve the rational reform of which in theory they were capable. As a result, the dominant feature of Peter's legislation in the eyes of many contemporaries was not the strategic vision that undoubtedly underpinned it, but the ruthlessness required to implement it. As Lewitter writes, 'so far from enjoying the benefits of a well-regulated state', the majority of Russians by 1725 'were living under a military regime, occupied, laid under contribution and governed by the army and liable to be tried under military law'.²⁹

Exemplary was Peter's brutal suppression of the *strel'tsy* revolt that cut short his Grand Embassy in 1698. As in 1682, the guards were motivated not so much by ideology as by resentment of their conditions of service. But their lasting commitment to the Old Belief helped to identify the schism with resistance and subversion in the tsar's mind. He was barely more tolerant of those who supported change. Industrial managers were hampered by inspectors appointed by a tsar who distrusted entrepreneurial ethics; officials in turn were watched over by *fiskaly*, spies placed by Peter as his personal representatives in every college and themselves absolved from the charge of making false accusations. Whilst the tsar's rationally ordered institutions famously provided the framework for Russian government until 1917, the Muscovite culture of denunciation built into his system was to last even longer.

No edict of Peter's was more Janus-faced than the law on the succession enacted after the execution of his son, Aleksei (1690–1718). A disappointment to his father, this sensitive boy became a magnet for Peter's critics. Following a lengthy secret investigation, the tsarevich was publicly convicted of treason by a specially convened assembly of 128 notables. Having renounced all rights to the throne in February 1718, Aleksei died in July in the fortress of St Peter and St Paul. He had certainly been tortured; few doubted that Peter had had him killed. On 11 February 1722, the tsar decreed that the reigning monarch could nominate his own successor. *The Justice of the Monarch's Right to Appoint the Heir to His Throne*, a treatise issued on 28 December, claimed on the authority of the Bible and Roman law that this edict was justified, not only by precedent, but also as a meritocratic way of selecting the monarch: 'not by birthright – a bad rule – but in accordance with moral excellence'.³⁰ Though in one sense a modernising measure embodying the concept of the ruler as 'servant of the state', the succession edict

²⁹ I. Pososhkov, *The Book of Poverty and Wealth*, ed. and tr. A. P. Vlasto and L. R. Lewitter (London, 1987), p. 106.

³⁰ A. Lentin, *Peter the Great. His Law on the Imperial Succession: The Official Commentary* (Oxford, 1996), p. 137. The work was attributed to Archbishop Feofan (Prokopovich) (1681–1736), whose authorship is now in doubt.

showed that the tsar still regarded that state as his own property, to dispose of as he thought fit just as he had disposed of Aleksei. There could hardly have been a sharper contrast with the ‘fundamental law’ that purported to guarantee the succession in many Western states (where Britain’s Glorious Revolution of 1688–9 was only one instance of its fallibility). In Russia, as Montesquieu later remarked, the result of Peter’s legislation was to render the Russian ‘throne as unsteady as the succession is arbitrary’.³¹ Ironically, the tsar himself failed to nominate an heir, leaving, at his death in 1725, the first of a series of succession crises that were to punctuate Russian history in the middle of the eighteenth century.

With the connivance of the guards, Peter’s principal henchman, Prince A. D. Menshikov, engineered the succession of the tsar’s widow. Born Marfa Skavronskaia, a semi-literate Livonian peasant who had caught Peter’s roving eye in 1703 and married him in 1712 (Aleksei’s mother, Evdokiia, having been incarcerated in a convent on suspicion of involvement in the *strel'tsy* revolt of 1698), Catherine I reigned until her death in May 1727. But she was scarcely able to rule on her own account. Initially a cipher for Menshikov, she was persuaded in February 1726 to sanction a six-member Supreme Privy Council intended by his rivals to rein him in. Menshikov was still powerful enough to ensure that the dying Catherine nominated as her successor the eleven-year-old grandson of Peter the Great, who reigned as Peter II from 1727 until his death from smallpox in January 1730. However, the parvenu prince overreached himself by betrothing his daughter Mariia to the new boy tsar. Stricken by illness, Menshikov was outmanoeuvred by another of Peter the Great’s advisers, the Westphalian A. I. (Heinrich) Osterman. Exiled in September 1727, Menshikov died in Siberia in November 1729. Meanwhile the Dolgorukii and Golitsyn families came to dominate the Supreme Privy Council, which itself had eclipsed both the Senate and the colleges.

Unchallenged by any rival body, it was this council that seized the initiative on the night of 18–19 January 1730. In the absence of a direct male descendant to Peter II, the council arbitrarily offered the throne to the 36-year-old Anna, duchess of Courland and niece of Peter the Great, provided that she accept a series of ‘conditions’ (*konditsii*) drawn up by Prince D. M. Golitsyn (1663–1737). Not only did these conditions bind the widowed Anna not to remarry and not to name an heir, but they also obliged her to consult a revamped eight-member council on all matters of high policy, including the declaration of war and peace.

³¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. A. Cohler, B. Miller, and H. Stone (Cambridge, 1989), p. 62 (V:11).

Golitsyn, an exceptionally erudite man acquainted with both the Polish and Swedish constitutions, probably intended to place limitations on monarchical power modelled on those imposed on Ulrike Eleonora when she briefly succeeded Charles XII in Stockholm in December 1718. But the rank-and-file Russian nobility, unaware of the council's outline plans to reassess wider social needs, saw only an attempt to strengthen the grip of an already overbearing clique. Gathered in Moscow, where they had expected to witness Peter II's marriage to Princess Ekaterina Dolgorukaia rather than attend his funeral, these nobles proved a surprisingly cohesive political force. They used the interval required to fetch Anna from Mittau to Moscow – where she arrived on 10 February, formally entering the city five days later – to emphasise that absolute monarchy was preferable to rule by the Supreme Privy Council. On 25 February Anna publicly tore up Golitsyn's conditions and embarked on her own unfettered reign.

The potential for constitutional change is evident. But since it remained unrealised, Paul Dukes is probably justified in regarding the significance of these events as an example of relatively sophisticated crisis management within a system that survived unscathed.³² However, if the Russian élite demonstrated in 1730 a degree of maturity beyond its reach in 1682 and 1698, partly because the reformed guards were now themselves an integral part of it, then the crisis nevertheless confirmed the central rôle of the palace revolution in Russian political culture. The likelihood of another coup was increased when Anna designated as her heir the unborn child of her thirteen-year-old niece who not only had yet to conceive, but was not even engaged at the time. Only in August 1740 did Anna Leopoldovna give birth to the son who became Ivan VI of Russia when the empress herself died childless in October of that year. In turn, Anna Leopoldovna's regency lasted only until the night of 24–5 November 1741, when the baby Ivan was himself ousted by a coup in favour of Peter the Great's daughter, Elizabeth Petrovna, who reigned until her death on 25 December 1761. Ivan was imprisoned until his assassination in 1764.

If Russia came to seem less threatening to its European rivals under the rule of women and children than it had under Peter the Great, then spectacular domestic achievements were no more to be expected of such monarchs than were international triumphs. First collected in 1724, the poll tax that Peter had instituted in 1718 to pay for his army had bequeathed a dangerous legacy in the form of heavy arrears and rampant peasant flight (a Senate commission recorded 327,046 male

³² P. Dukes, *The Making of Russian Absolutism 1613–1801*, 2nd edn (London, 1990), pp. 117–18.

fugitives between 1727 and 1741).³³ Many of the tsar's more ambitious plans, such as those designed to improve local government, remained unfulfilled for lack of funds. Neither did there seem much prospect of central control since the planned codification of the laws, required to supersede the outdated *Ulozhenie*, remained incomplete at Peter's death and was never implemented. Small wonder that such an ambitious initiative as the Academy of Sciences, established in 1725, got off to a slow start without its founder to goad its development. Small wonder, either, that Russian intellectuals, long fascinated by patterns in history, should recently have compared the middle of the eighteenth century with Brezhnev's 'era of stagnation' or, worse, branded it one of Russia's allegedly recurrent phases of reactionary counter-reform.³⁴

As several scholars have stressed, such temptations must be resisted: all the most important indices point to continuity and growth. The hostility to contemplative (and thus allegedly useless) monasticism expressed in Peter's Spiritual Regulation of 1721 was maintained under his immediate successors. Between 1724 and 1738, the number of monks, nuns, and novices in Russia was almost halved from 25,207 to 14,282. By contrast, between 1725 and 1763, the number of Russian linen and woollen manufactories grew from thirteen to seventy-nine and from fourteen to sixty-eight respectively. Trade also held up well. Iron exports rose more than 500 per cent in the 1730s alone, reflecting the strength of the industry Peter had established in the Urals to support his reformed armed forces, whilst the value of St Petersburg's trade between 1725 and 1739 increased from 3.4 to 4.1 million rubles. Though inflation ate into these achievements, the overall trend clearly points upwards.

For all that, what is most striking about the years after 1725 is what did not happen: there was no civil war. Following the unexpected death of Peter the Great, a ruler in the mould of Ivan the Terrible, Russia might have been expected to relapse into the sort of chaos that gripped Muscovy from 1584. Yet, *pace* Alexander Yanov, no Time of Troubles recurred.³⁵ Instead, Russia gained time for consolidation in which, far from being manoeuvred into reaction, even relatively weak rulers presided over the penetration of the Petrine system. Part of the explanation lies in his successors' need to enhance their legitimacy by emphasising

³³ N. V. Kozlova, *Pobegi krest'ian v Rossii v pervoi treti XVIIIv.* (Moscow, 1983), p. 145.

³⁴ The first is among many ambitious parallels ventured by Ia. Gordin, *Mezh rabstvom i svobodoi: 19 ianvaria–25 fevralia 1730 goda* (St Petersburg, 1994); for the second, see, *inter alia*, the historical sociology by V. V. Il'in, *et al.*, *Reformy i kontrreformy v Rossii: tsikly modernizatsionnogo protsessa* (Moscow, 1996), esp. pp. 36–40.

³⁵ A. Yanov, 'The Drama of the Time of Troubles, 1725–1730', *CASS*, 12, 1 (1978), pp. 1–59, belongs in the tradition mentioned above, n. 34.

continuity with Peter the Great. But this argument was persuasive only because it resonated with a wider acceptance of Peter's reforms. Paradoxically, this in turn depended on the incorporation within those reforms of many Muscovite traditions. But it also signalled that the nobility, at least, had been flexible enough to adapt to a substantial degree of innovation. Though many resented Peter's brutality and some hankered after a return to the patriarchal morals he had flouted, no one seriously supposed that the genie he had released could be forced back into the Muscovite bottle. The need to maintain Russia's new-found international status, enshrined in the treaty of Nystad in 1721, was only the most obvious reason why the reformist impulse had to be sustained.

It remains debatable whether female rule was essential to the survival of the Petrine system because only women 'could claim to defend Peter's heritage without threatening a return of his punitive fury'.³⁶ Gentleness may have seemed impressive in theory – Montesquieu acknowledged female rule as one of few ways in which Russian despotism might be mitigated – but its impact was less obvious in practice. If it is feminine to be beautiful, frivolous, and fashion-conscious, Elizabeth certainly qualifies. By contrast, the notoriously unattractive Anna was a crack shot at her best with a gun on her shoulder. Since neither empress sustained her initial interest in government, both looked negligent alongside their zealous contemporaries in the rival houses of Habsburg and Hohenzollern. In June 1735, Anna delegated to her ministers the right to sign legislation; advisers and foreign envoys alike struggled to do business with Elizabeth, to whom routine was anathema. Towards the end, suffering from what may have been epilepsy, she withdrew from both work and the public gaze. Mid-century achievements were made not so much by the empresses as in spite of them.

Anna was dominated by Ernst-Johann Bühren (in Russian, Biron) (1690–1772), duke of Courland from 1737, who unwittingly gave his name to the *bironovshchina*, an alleged German conspiracy to denigrate everything the Russians held dear. Biron was certainly corrupt, and the Secret Chancellery (Preobrazhenskii prikaz), revived in 1731 under A. I. Ushakov, who had served in it under Peter the Great, promoted the black arts of denunciation to new levels of sophistication. But there is no evidence of systematic mistreatment of Russians. This was a myth created by Elizabeth's image-makers in the aftermath of her coup when, not for the last time, it suited a new empress to pose as the agent of national salvation. In the 1750s, Elizabeth came to rely on advisers who rescued her from the slavish devotion to her father's legacy that

³⁶ R. S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol. I, *From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton, 1995), p. 85.

circumscribed her early legislation. In foreign policy, A. P. Bestuzhev-Riumin (1693–1766) was a staunch advocate of the Austrian alliance to which Russia was committed from 1726 to 1762; at home, the most original mind belonged to Petr Shuvalov (1711–62), who conceived the innovative indirect taxation schemes which helped Russia to survive the Seven Years War from 1756 to 1762.

Renewed international conflict gave an irresistible impetus not only to military reform, but also to the loosening of government economic regulation. Like the secularisation of the church lands (1764), another measure motivated primarily by fiscal need, these projects were completed only under Catherine II. But their origins were rooted in the two previous reigns. So were educational reforms. We still understand little about the reformist atmosphere that led to the foundation in 1755 of the University of Moscow, and two years later of the Academy of Fine Arts. And yet recent work has made the links between the 1750s and the 1770s seem increasingly important. Continuities in personnel clearly mattered. For example, D. V. Volkov (1717–85), secretary to Elizabeth's court 'conference' (effectively a council of war), became president of the College of Foreign Affairs under Peter III (when his impact was paradoxically greatest at home), and ended his career, after a brief interval as governor of Orenburg, as president of Catherine's College of Manufactures between 1764 and 1777. But ministerial stability was not enough: monarchical decisiveness was also required and this the cautious Elizabeth lacked. Her successor, born Karl Peter Ulrich of Holstein (1728–62), was if anything too impetuous. Irascible and capricious in his personal dealings, Peter III took more interest in government than historians once thought. It did not help him. He alienated both the army, by making a hasty peace with the Prussians whom it had trounced in the Seven Years War, and the church, by his aggressive attempts to confiscate its lands. Tsars who attempted too much too quickly never lasted long. On 28 June 1762, having reigned for less than a year, Peter was overthrown by guards who thought his wife a more promising champion of their interests.

It is one of the many ironies of the reign of Catherine the Great, born Sophie of Anhalt-Zerbst (1729–96), that, despite having been elevated to the throne by the coup which resulted first in the deposition and soon after in the murder of her husband, she should have done more than any other ruler to supply the stable legal framework that Russia so urgently required. By the 1760s, the institutions created by Peter I were sufficiently well established to allow Catherine to follow Montesquieu's view of the monarch as 'the soul, not the arm' of government: 'it is often

better to inspire than to order reforms', she noted.³⁷ Attracted to ideas as a teenager, she performed the rôle of philosopher-queen with élan. In 1763, she joined the select band of rulers who subscribed to Baron Melchior Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, a manuscript digest of the latest Parisian news and thought. Diderot, whose work she subsidised by purchasing his library in 1765, visited her in the winter of 1773–4. She liked him, but could hardly have been expected to share his recent conversion to the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Finding the flattering Voltaire's *thèse royale* more congenial, she made him her principal Western correspondent until his death in 1778. By then Voltaire had been succeeded by Grimm himself, always the least radical of *philosophes*. In part, such contacts were intended to propagate a favourable image of Russia in Europe, an aim in which they were largely successful. But they also reflected the empress's commitment to reason, humanity, and utility.

In 1767 she placed this Enlightened trinity at the heart of her Instruction (*Nakaz*) to the Legislative Commission, a representative body convoked in a further attempt to replace the antiquated *Ulozhenie*, which the empress nevertheless admired as an edict consonant with the demands of its time and place. As Catherine openly acknowledged, her own treatise drew verbatim on Montesquieu and Beccaria.³⁸ It set out her vision of a tolerant, educated society in which her subjects' liberty and property would be protected by unambiguous laws established by a virtuous absolute sovereign and implemented to the letter by judges who were to assume the accused innocent until proven guilty. Never had such radical ideas been articulated in Russia. Yet, interrupted by war, the commission never completed its work. In 1775, impatient with her subjects' lukewarm response to her exhortations, Catherine resorted to direct intervention in the Petrine manner. Whereas Peter I had concentrated on central government, she now developed her long-standing interest in the local administration that had failed to contain the revolt led by the cossack Emel'ian Pugachev in Russia's south-eastern borderlands in 1773–5. This was to be the last great peasant rebellion of the eighteenth century.

³⁷ 'Istoricheskie i avtobiograficheskie otryvki, zametki, pis'ma', in *Sochineniia Imperatritsy Ekateriny II*, ed. A. N. Pypin, 12 vols., vol. XII (St Petersburg, 1907), p. 627, undated jotting.

³⁸ See W. F. Reddaway, *Documents of Catherine the Great: The Correspondence with Voltaire and the Instruction of 1767 in the English Text of 1768* (Cambridge, 1931). Subsequent quotations from the *Nakaz* are taken from this edition. Another contemporary translation has been published, with an excellent introduction, by P. Dukes, ed., *Catherine the Great's Instruction (NAKAZ) to the Legislative Commission, 1767* (Newtonville, MA, 1977).

The execution of Pugachev in January 1775 is one of several reasons to regard the mid-1770s as a turning point in Catherine's reign. She had humiliated the Turks in the war of 1768–74, completed the first partition of Poland with Prussia and Austria in 1772, ended her long-standing relationship with the unfaithful Grigorii Orlov in the same year, and, most importantly of all, survived the majority of her son Paul (1754–1801), regarded by some as the legitimate heir to Peter III. In informal partnership with Grigorii Potemkin – her lover between 1774 and 1776, almost certainly her husband, and definitely a key influence until his death in 1791 – Catherine now took advantage of a decade of peace to introduce the provincial reform of 1775, the police ordinance of 1782, and the national system of schools established in 1786. Though these laws owed more to German cameralist regulation than to the unsystematic French *philosophes*, the empress's commitment to their broad conception of reason and humanity remained undimmed until the twin influences of the French Revolution and the radicalisation of Enlightened thought led her to reject the intellectual speculation she had earlier encouraged. A. N. Radishchev, author of the critical *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow* (1790), was exiled; Voltaire's works were burned. It was in these final years that Catherine's gruesome fascination for her last and least savoury lover, Platon Zubov, thirty-eight years her junior, confirmed the reputation for licentiousness for which posterity would soon condemn her.

By 1796, the upper echelons of Russian society would barely have been recognisable to people who lived a century earlier. Those whom Peter the Great had been obliged to coerce Catherine could afford to coax. Released from compulsory service by Peter III in 1762 – the most important achievement of his brief and turbulent reign – many nobles had continued to serve voluntarily, as the tsar himself expected. Some returned to the countryside to revitalise their provincial estates; others travelled to the West. On her fifty-sixth birthday, 21 April 1785, Catherine rewarded them all by issuing a charter confirming the privileges they had acquired over the course of the century.³⁹ In conjunction with the didactic Enlightened journalism that Catherine was initially pleased to sponsor, the charter helped to confirm Russian nobles in their corporate sense of identity as a civilised cosmopolitan élite. By 1796, educated society had reached an unprecedented degree of maturity and the most articulate elements within it displayed an unprecedented ambition to participate in government. It was crucial to Russia's devel-

³⁹ See D. M. Griffiths and G. E. Munro, trs. and eds., *Catherine II's Charters of 1785 to the Nobility and the Towns* (Bakersfield, CA, 1991), and below, ch. 4.

opment that Catherine's successor acknowledged none of their aspirations.

Such are the vagaries of the individual mind that, whilst Joseph II of Austria became the ultimate enlightened despot on the basis of an overwhelmingly Catholic education, Tsar Paul developed an obsession with medieval chivalry despite having been systematically schooled in the Enlightenment. To the alarm of one of his former tutors, Metropolitan Platon (Levshin) (1737–1812), the tsar even tried to extend Russian orders of chivalry to the Orthodox episcopate. Paul's personal holy grail was in Malta, where he was elected grand master of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem in 1798. His volatility and mania for Prussian-style parades led generations of scholars to regard him as mad. Doubting this diagnosis, more recent historians have instead looked for a logic behind the flurry of legislation that threw Catherine's work into reverse and his subjects into confusion. Paul's initial rejection of his mother's expansionism might have been expected to please leading Russians resentful of its costs; the tsar's personal frugality complemented his attempts to cut state expenditure; and it was he who resolved the vexed question of the succession by decreeing a fixed male line on 5 April 1797. Yet, ironically for one whose watchword was discipline, Paul's unpredictability rendered his régime unstable. No single measure can be blamed for his overthrow: restrictions on nobles' freedom of expression, legislation that freed their serfs from work on a Sunday, even the odd noble flogging might each have been tolerable in isolation. But together they represented a relapse into the insecurity from which the nobility had struggled for so long to escape. This was too much to bear. On the night of 11 March 1801, a group of disaffected officers – co-ordinated by the governor-general of St Petersburg, General Count Peter von der Pahlen – strangled the tsar in his rooms at the Mikhailovskii palace in St Petersburg. With fitting symmetry, Paul's brief reign ended, like that of Peter III, in cold-blooded assassination.

Alexander I (1777–1825) remains the most elusive of tsars. To Metternich he seemed superficial; some historians have found him hypocritical. His vacillating personality, often explained by the childhood need to please both Catherine and Paul, imperilled many of the friendships in which he placed so much trust. But his troubles owed as much to his political circumstances as to his psychological makeup. Complicity in the coup that culminated in the murder of his father not only left Alexander with a lifelong guilty conscience but also committed him to change. Between his accession and coronation, which portrayed this fundamentally military man as the epitome of angelic gentleness, the tsar made a series of rhetorical obeisances to the 'heart and laws' of